

## ANALYSIS

### *Four Quartets* (1943)



T. S. Eliot

(1888-1965)

“These religious and philosophic meditations have a musical structure implied by their title, and are composed of four long lyrics titled by place names: ‘Burnt Norton,’ the site of an English country house; ‘East Coker,’ the English village that was the Eliot family’s ancestral home; ‘The Dry Salvages,’ a group of rocks off Cape Ann, Massachusetts; and ‘Little Gidding,’ the British site of a 17<sup>th</sup>-century Anglican community. The dominant themes are time present, time past, time future, timelessness, identity, memory, consciousness, and place.”

James D. Hart

*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition  
(Oxford 1941-83)

“In *Four Quartets* (1943) he illustrated his conviction that ‘the use of recurrent themes is as natural to poetry as to music.’ Looking back now over the past generation, he here finds our poetry to have been most characterized by its ‘search for a proper modern colloquial idiom.’ But he holds that we may be nearing another stage: ‘When we reach a point at which the poetic idiom can be stabilized, then a period of musical elaboration can follow.’ The *Quartets* undertake such elaboration in a very different style from the witty paradoxes and conceits with which he formerly emulated the metaphysicals. Here he balances passages of meditative declaration against formal lyrics. His early work was difficult in its form, these poems are difficult in their thought. Their logic is sufficiently straightforward, but they present the reader with discourse largely unfamiliar to a secular age.

The poet’s reflections on time and memory return to his interest in Bergson, but Eliot is primarily occupied with the Christian conception of how man lives both ‘in and out of time,’ of how he is immersed in the flux and yet can penetrate to the eternal by apprehending timeless existence within time and above it. No less central to his mind is the doctrine of Incarnation, of God become man through the Savior, since Eliot holds that the nineteenth century substitution of Deification, of man becoming God through his own potentialities, led ineluctably through hero worship to dictatorship. Eliot had now found amore solid basis

for his politics, as he demonstrated in his play, *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), where he contrasted Christian law with violent usurpation of the fascist kind. It was easy to say that Eliot's religious poems were not widely representative of the age; but in a period of breakdown, moving into the shadow of war, they constituted some of the most sustained, if most somber, devotional poetry since the seventeenth century."

F. O. Matthiessen  
*The Literary History of the United States*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition  
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1356-57

"It will be clear to those familiar with *Four Quartets* that Eliot's imagined circle and 'still point' have what Jung calls the mandala form, though any materials supplied by the unconscious would only confirm what Eliot had already accepted intellectually: Psychology is the handmaid and not the housekeeper of theology. Eliot too is frequently accused of 'mysticism,' a word loosely used nowadays, and associated almost always with emotional experiences unrelated to any intellectual and moral discipline. Eliot's 'mysticism' is never of this nature, as he has tried to make clear in his prose writings. He is in the tradition of those Christian and Oriental mystics who have believed that moments of intuitive insight into the nature of 'reality' come as the crown to 'prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.' His poetry from 'Gerontion' onwards is a record of the gradual development from the position where his intellect accepted Christian dogma, through the stages by which intellectual acceptance grew painfully and arduously into a conviction embracing the totality of personal and social experience. As he says himself: 'a religious "experience" without dogma is very different from the experience of believing a dogma.'

*Four Quartets* are his ripest, most complex and most complete expression of 'the experience of believing a dogma'; of the moments of intuitive apprehension of its truth, and of the relation of these to a view of history and to the general living of life. Of the 'mystical' experiences of the moments of vision, Eliot says in his essay on Pascal, 'you may call it communion with the Divine, or you may call it a temporary crystallization of the mind,' and he comments that such illuminations occur to many people who are not mystics, and that 'they can be judged only by their fruits.' *Four Quartets* are religious poems, but as Eliot said of other great religious poetry, the poet is not persuading us to believe anything, he is revealing what it feels like to believe his religion."

Elizabeth Drew  
*T. S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry*  
(Scribner's 1949) 144-45

"*Four Quartets* make a great lyric of history, personal but representative, exhausting the movement and meaning of time. It is a revision of Gerontion's view, a later version of 'Think now History has many cunning passages.' It is not a revision of the theory Eliot held then, but a deeper penetration into its meaning. In 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' he had said that '...the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence...' Thus he had thought in 1917; now he plumbs the depths of these relationships as St. Augustine explored the nature of time (*Confessions*, Bk. XI). The place names of *Four Quartets* (1943) derive their significance from this connection; it is in places that you enter into history and escape from it.

If history is made by time, time is made by meaning. Hear Chorus VII of 'The Rock' on the Incarnation of the Word: 'Then came, at a predetermined moment, a moment in time and of time, / A moment not out of time, but in time, in what we call history...' This incarnation of the spiritual must occur in a moment of time but not resemble a moment of time. Thus the historical sense becomes or is translated into the spiritual sense. In the process another remark in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' acquires a new significance: 'But the difference between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past's awareness of itself cannot show.' For the individual, this is to have had the experience but missed the meaning, to become conscious of it later. Moments of time must be in places, is known in time and place. The significant places for Eliot become the titles of these poems: Burnt Norton, East Coker, The Dry Salvages, and Little Gidding.

From these places 'in time and of time' he attempts to recover the meaning of time, but their pattern only becomes apparent in the light of moments that are 'not like a moment of time.' These titles make the

circle of his beginning and end, from the point of family origin in England to America and return. In the cycle of being time and place change, but not the significance. If England and America meet in 'Burnt Norton,' Missouri and Massachusetts appear in 'The Dry Salvages'.... On the personal side, *Four Quartets* might be regarded as 'a series of images...of history by which time is explored until it reveals the circular journey of man. The ultimate discovery is that if man enters the garden of the past and follows his history, he arrives at the garden from which he set out.'

George Williamson  
*A Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot: A Poem-by-Poem Analysis*  
(1949; Farrar, Straus/Noonday 1957-63) 205-08

"*Four Quartets* is a volume consisting of four symmetrical meditations on philosophical and religious subjects. The images of the poems are intended to communicate the subjective experience of religious faith. Each quartet is named for a geographical location and identified with one of the four humors of medieval medicine. 'Burnt Norton' takes its name from a manor-house in Gloucestershire; its element is fire. 'East Coker' is a small village in Somersetshire; the element of the poem is earth. The 'Dry Salvages' are rocks off the New England coast; the element is water. 'Little Gidding' is the site of a religious community of the seventeenth century; the dominant element is air. The quarters follow a quasi-musical structure, and each poem is identified with an aspect of Christian religious experience."

Donald Heiney  
*Recent American Literature 4*  
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 490-91

"Said to have been modeled on the late quartets of Beethoven, each poem is structurally analogous to the classical sonata form, progressing through five 'movements' in which themes and variations are introduced, developed, and finally resolved. The *Quartets*, considered by some critics to be Eliot's finest work, are both the record of a journey from skepticism to faith and an attempt to communicate a religious experience in an age lacking traditional religious belief.

Each poem has as its primary image one of the four elements, air, earth, water, and fire, and each is located, by its title, at a specific place: 'Burnt Norton' refers to a seventeenth century manor house; 'East Coker' to the Somersetshire village from which Eliot's ancestor set out for the New World; 'The Dry Salvages' to a group of rocks off the coast of Massachusetts, a landscape familiar to Eliot from childhood; and 'Little Gidding' to the English village to which Nicholas Ferrar retired in the seventeenth century to lead a life of devotion, a place which Eliot himself visited.

The progression of the poems is from abstraction to universal experience; thus the first poem is much more 'obscure' and dependent upon the rest of the group for its explication than the last poem, which can be understood without reference to the preceding three. The subject of 'Burnt Norton' is the unexpected and unsought moment of joy at the 'still point' out of time where the pattern of life and of past, present, and future can be apprehended. 'East Coker' deals with the passage of time and the cyclic nature of human life and history. 'The Dry Salvages' contrasts the time of the river, which is human time, with that of the sea, which is eternity. 'Little Gidding' celebrates a visit to the chapel 'where prayer has been valid' for a moment of dedication that has transcended time and space and in which the themes and images of the preceding poems find their resolution."

Max J. Herzberg & staff  
*The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962)

"Less than ten years after the reactionary announcement of 1927 [conversion to Anglo-Catholicism], the poet began writing *Four Quartets*, a record of the growth of a poet's mind that reminds us in several respects of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. The central theme of these meditations on time and eternity, the meaning of the reports of mystics and the meaning of living 'in passage,' is that time and nature are not empty of meaning, so that belief simply on authority, in the medieval way, is not necessary. There is the Incarnation to show that God is immanent as well as transcendent; and there are many lesser incarnations. Nature does grant epiphanies of transcendental meaning to those who are prepared to receive them. 'The way up' of the immanentist or Nature mystic and 'the way down,' or inward, of the medieval mystics, lead

to the same still point. Emerson and the Unitarian grandfather would have rejoiced, even though they would have thought that the *Quartets* were a little too respectful toward the more orthodox 'way down.' *Four Quartets* is a great poem...

The doctrines 'behind' *Four Quartets* are Anglo-Catholic, which is to say, in philosophic terms, essentialist; but the poem itself can be better explicated in the terms provided by the religious Existentialists than it can be by Catholic dogma, which it does not contradict, but does not depend on for its effect, either. Eliot's dogmas are in his prose, not in his poetry.... Karl Shapiro noticed, angrily, several years ago that *Four Quartets* is not a mystical poem, only a religious one—and, he might have added, a philosophic and theological one of great learning and great subtlety. That is precisely why it is so helpful. If it were a mystical poem, it would be only another example of a class of which we have examples aplenty. Rather, it is—and, I should suppose, was intended to be—a meditative poem, a series of meditations on the nature of time and eternity, experience and reality, the many and the all, the dance and the still point—in short, on the subjects of mystic experience."

Hyatt H. Waggoner  
*American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present*  
(Houghton 1968) 417, 424, 647

"Each of the poems is named for a place of special significance to the author; they are parallel in structure; and there is a great deal of cross reference.... Eliot also had in mind the late quartets of Beethoven, with their strange transitions, intermingling of conventional and original forms, internal references and unpredicted sonorities.... This is farewell to Wagner, welcome to Beethoven. The four poems have strong structural similarities. The first movements are divided into three parts, like sonata form in the opening movements of classical music. The second movement varies from lyric stanzas to a 'prosaic' section ('Little Gidding' is a slight exception); the third is a discursive exploration of stated themes; the fourth is lyrical and usually in stanzas, and its themes are usually explicitly Christian; the fifth (itself anomalous in the classical quartet except for Beethoven) is in two sections and recapitulates the whole.

The four poems share preoccupations most clearly enunciated in the first, and 'Little Gidding,' coming last, is full of references to the earlier poems.... The poems are all concerned with time and eternity, history and the present, the intervention of the divine in human life. They are thus philosophical poems, and their philosophy is Christian; Eliot's acceptance into the church, predictable enough on the evidence of his early work, had happened years before. Yet the poems are not doctrinal and do not depend upon religious or intellectual assent from the reader. The 'set' from which Eliot says they are elaborated is not the Thirty-nine Articles of his church. Its images are sometimes those private ones, inexplicably meaningful, mentioned in the notes to 'The Journey of the Magi'; others—the garden, the wounded god, the sea and death by water, the chapel and the refining fire—are familiar to readers of 'The Waste Land.' The *Quartets* comprise a complex poem of great transparency, virtuosity, and originality; and quite obviously they are colored by the mind of a poet, not a philosopher or theologian.

Each of the four poems has its own season and its own element; 'Little Gidding' is winter and fire. Its title is the name of a village in Huntingdonshire, off the Great North Road out of London, where, in 1625, Nicholas Ferrar established the Anglican community described by Izaak Walton in his *Life of Herbert*... Eliot visited it in 1936. It had not for him the personal associations of East Coker, the Somerset village from which his ancestors had set out for New England, nor of the Dry Salvages—rocks off the coast of Cape Ann, Massachusetts—where he spent boyhood summers; but its attractions, as the site of a rare experiment in Anglican piety in the days of the seventeenth-century Anglican preachers and poets he venerated, and as a spot associated with the Royal Martyr, were great. The blend of monasticism and family life, ruined by that Civil War to which Eliot in a sense attributed the 'dissociation of sensibility' and gave him a locus for his meditation on conflicts resolved by divine intervention.

Eliot wrote 'Little Gidding' in the darkest time of the war for the British; and just as in the other poems he suggests his London, its crowds and 'tubes' (subways), here he incorporates into the texture of the poem the heavy night bombing and the fire raids of the winter of 1940-41. 'Little Gidding' is a poem of fire, and not only Pentecostal fire but also the conflagration of cities, of St. Paul's ringed by flame as it was in December 1940. One of the epigraphs to 'Burnt Norton' is a fragment of Heraclitus: 'The way up and the

way down are one and the same.’ One is ‘redeemed from fire by fire.’ The image of a purgatorial London, set against both history and the timeless that intersects history and the present moment, is essential to the feeling of the poem.”

Frank Kermode & John Hollander, eds.  
*Modern British Literature*  
(Oxford 1973) 494-96

“Eliot’s major work after ‘The Waste Land’ was the sequence now known as *Four Quartets* (‘Burnt Norton,’ ‘East Coker,’ ‘The Dry Salvages,’ and ‘Little Gidding’). The first was written in 1935, the others during World War II; they were published together in the United States in 1943. They should be read, in part, as war poems, as well as poems having a relation, as Eliot said, to ‘the four seasons and the four elements.’ In wartime, Eliot’s confidence in the value of writing was momentarily shaken: ‘It is hard...to feel confident that morning after morning spent fiddling with words and rhythms is justified activity—especially as there is never any certainty that the whole thing won’t have to be scrapped.’”

Helen Vendler  
*The Harper American Literature 2*  
(Harper & Row 1987) 1637

Michael Hollister (2015)